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SUBJECT: BELGIAN CONTRIBUTION TO EUROPEAN SPACE AGENCY
AROUSES IRE

¶1. (SBU) Belgium's Senate is having heated discussions over Belgium's contribution to the European Space Agency (ESA) budget. The Senate's advisor and legislation manager for Space and Technology Issues told Econoff that the 200 million euro annual contribution of Belgium to the ESA was dominantly earmarked for the ESA launcher program -- which consumes the lion's share of ESA funding. Senate misgivings are not over the level of procurement orders that would come back to Belgian producers, but rather over the regional distribution of the orders. Due to the leading role of Walloon aerospace firms in space sciences over the past thirty years, most of this procurement is sourced in Wallonia, Belgium's francophone south. Break-out of ESA orders gives about 90 percent of contracts to Wallonia, and only about 10 percent to Dutch-speaking Flanders.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy source voiced the expectation that the Senate and later the lower house of Parliament will approve the funding, but only after obtaining federal government acknowledgment that more investment should be made in Flanders in the aerospace technology sector. This will also provide substance to the expected debate over whether the federal government will continue to hold responsibility for international space sciences cooperation. Belgium's progressive devolution of power to the three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) since 1980 has seen most science and technology policy and investment promotion for innovation shift to the region level from the federal level. After national elections planned for the May/June period, Belgium plans talks on the Federal-Regional power distribution. The Senate sciences advisor believed that ultimately the federal role would be upheld, because the structure of the ESA designates national participants. In his view, asking the ESA to accept regions as sovereign members "would open the door to madness", given the many regional voices present in ESA countries, and render the ESA unmanageable.

¶3. (SBU) Comment: If this incident is any indicator, Belgium's classic linguistic political friction remains alive, despite handing many powers to the regions. The spring constitutional reform discussions could open Pandora's Box further.

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